

Q&A WITH COACH YURI SUGUIYAMA

COACH YURI SUGUIYAMA

BY MICHAEL J. STOTT

After an impressive career at the University of North Carolina, Yuri Suguiyama returned to his Curl-Burke swimming roots, where he is now a mentor to rising distance star Katie Ledecky.



**Head Coach
Georgetown Prep Facility
Curl-Burke Swim Club
North Bethesda, Maryland**

Coach Yuri Suguiyama (University of North Carolina, B.A., political science and economics, '04) was a captain of the swimming team and a four-year letterman. Aside from a brief Wachovia Bank stint, he has remained in aquatics, serving as Southern Village Swim Club (Chapel Hill) head coach and assistant at the North Carolina Aquatic Club. Presently, he is the head coach at the Georgetown Prep facility in North Bethesda, Md. Last October, he was named Potomac Valley Swimming Coach of the Year. In addition to a diploma, Suguiyama left UNC as the ACC champion in the 200 yard free (1:37.33) and school record holder in the 1000 and 1650 freestyles (9:09.52, 15:05.10). In 2006-07, he was a coach of the Potomac Valley Zone Team.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY CURL-BURKE SWIM CLUB

Q *Swimming World:*
• **You started coaching at age 16. What was the motivation?**

A: **Coach Yuri Suguiyama:**
I loved the sport and working with kids. A small community pool was willing to give me a chance. I learned a lot about teaching strokes and interacting with parents. Thirteen years later, some of my 8-and-unders are still swimming.

Rick Curl helped you as a swimmer and as a coach, yes?

Rick cared about me as a person first and an athlete second. That's why we were willing to swim through walls for him. As a colleague, Rick has an ability to always find silver linings. Whether it's a pool or troublesome parent issue, Rick stays positive and finds a solution.

After college, why not get a "real job"?

I did—working on Wachovia Bank's trading floor for three months. It was exciting at times and challenging, but sitting in front of a computer and making money for a bank wasn't how I wanted to spend my days. Rick called me from Australia. I mentioned that I was having second thoughts about bank-

ing. He called me back and offered me a position.

Talk about your coaching style and philosophy.

Legendary UNC soccer coach Anson Dorrance says, "I respect talent, but I admire courage." That sums up the way I coach. It takes courage to commit yourself to be the best you can be, especially when there's no guarantee of success. It also takes courage to come to the pool every day and push yourself to your physical limit. I challenge my athletes always to give their best effort. Sometimes that means asking them to do things they don't want to do.

At what point do you introduce dryland to your athletes?

We start doing a basic form of dryland training at the 12-and-under level—push-ups, squats, jumping jacks, lunges, and then progress from there. Each day, our senior swimmers have a dynamic warm-up routine designed to loosen up their shoulders and wake up their system. We also run for six weeks in the fall and another six weeks in the spring.

What about weight training?

My senior group consists mostly of freshmen and sophomores. I don't consider weight training essential for them yet. I'd rather see 20 proper push-ups than bench or dead-lift. It's important that there's a progression in the career of every

swimmer. For those with aspirations to swim in college, there will be plenty of time to strength train. However, we do swim with parachutes and resistance cords, and I consider that to be a poor man's weight training.

By what principles do you want your swimmers to live?

From John Flanagan—another CUBU coach and mentor—I borrowed the idea of P.R.I.D.E., which stands for Personal Responsibility in Daily Effort. I want my swimmers to be accountable for their actions in and out of the pool.

The other is doing “something special” every day. Leading up to the 2000 Olympic Trials and Games, Rick and Tom Dolan emphasized that every day you should try and do something special during practice.

At the 2011 NCSA Junior Nationals, your boys finished first, the girls third, and you won the combined team title. Is CUBU making a resurgence?

Yes. We've added more swimmers over the past three years, and they're swimming faster than ever. Also, our success has been driven by other clubs around us, specifically North Baltimore, NOVA of Virginia and Rockville Montgomery. Those are three of the best teams in the country. We race them frequently. My first year coaching, NBAC beat us handily in the dual meet, with my site contributing very few points. That score was motivation for a long time.

(Editor's Note: at the most recent NCSA Junior Nationals held at Orlando, Fla., in March, Curl-Burke finished first among the girls, second among the boys, and won the combined team title for the second straight year.)

How do you progress someone such as Katie Ledecky?

From an early age, we have done annual early season goal setting with an eye to her future. Rick and our senior-level coaches—Pete Morgan, John Flanagan, Jeff King and Tim Kelly—have always advised me not to rush the process. Katie could have skipped some steps, but she has learned from each experience and still moved up the competitive ladder. Some people questioned us not taking her to nationals this past summer, but I think it was great that she was able to go to juniors, win (four) races and win the high-point award.

As a fairly young coach on a national stage with a young superstar, do you have any concerns?

I want to make sure that I'm doing right by my swimmers—especially with one as committed and hard working as Katie. Just as they're continually growing and learning about the sport and themselves, so am I as a coach. I keep meticulous notes on every practice, and at season's end, I reflect on what worked and what didn't. I also love comparing practice notes with the likes of John Flanagan.

In training Katie Ledecky, does it help that you were an outstanding middle and distance freestyler?

It's a big plus. There is something honest and pure

about training and racing longer swims, and I love coaching them. I still remember the various thoughts I had during tough races, so I try and design sets to help my swimmers cope with those feelings.

How do you keep your athletes fresh and motivated?

That's every senior coach's challenge. I make all of my swimmers—regardless of age—train IM almost daily. When I was 15 until 17, I swam freestyle every lap, every day in practice. That was physically and mentally tough. I continually communicate with swimmers and help them set goals and manage expectations. Swimmers burn out when they stop improving, but sometimes they stop improving because they aren't doing what they need to do to improve. Recognizing and acknowledging where they're stumbling can go a long way to keeping them engaged with the sport.

Your long-term goal for your swimmers is to be successful in the water and out. How about for yourself?

I hope to coach for as long as Curl-Burke lets me. I really enjoy watching the swimmers mature and learn from our sport. I've heard it said that “if you find something you love to do, you'll never have to work another day in your life.” If that's the case, I haven't really been working for the last six years! ♦

Michael J. Stott, one of Swimming World Magazine's USA contributors, is based in Richmond, Va.

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KATIE LEDECKY

BY MICHAEL J. STOTT

American swimming has a knack for producing refreshing new faces. In the past four years, we've seen the likes of Elizabeth Beisel and Missy Franklin attain "real-deal" status. Poised to join them is Curl-Burke's Katie Ledecy.

Just 14 in February, she shot to fourth in the world rankings in the 800 free with an 8:30.14. Earlier, she bested two national age group 13-14 standards by posting a 4:35.14 in the 500 free (old record, Sippy Woodhead, 4:39.94) and a 9:29.81 in the 1000 (Michele Richardson, 9:33.39).

At the Missouri Grand Prix in February, her 2:00.01 clocking in the 200 meter free left her 1-hundredth of a second shy of becoming the fifth 13-14-year-old girl to break two minutes.

Ledecy turned 15 in mid-March, just before the NCSA Juniors in Orlando, Fla. (See "Defining Moments," page 27, to read about her accomplishments at that meet.) She will head to Omaha this summer with Olympic Trials cuts in the 100, 200, 400 and 800 meter freestyles.

These days, the 5-11 Ledecy trains eight sessions a week. Three are combined with a dry-land focus on shoulder strength and stabilization through the use of stretch cords.

"What sets her apart is her great work ethic and inner drive," says her coach, Yuri Suguiyama. "From hard work, Katie has developed a big aerobic engine along with an uncanny ability to get better during a tough swim, set or even week. She's incredibly consistent in her practice attendance and usually the first person in the water. In four years of coaching her, I can count on one hand the number of practices she's missed due to something other than illness," he says.

"At the beginning of each season, she and I always sit down and set both short-term and long-term goals. The difference between Katie and others is that she has always understood that while goal setting is a great exercise, it's more important to focus on *how* to reach those goals.

"From a very early age, we noticed that Katie loved to race. The bigger the race, the more she seems to enjoy the challenge. She will give her best effort regardless of how she is feeling. Deep down, she really embraces the personal challenges involved in our sport.

"There are two sides to Katie," says Suguiyama. "Out of the water, she is a very nice and humble person who is a great teammate and a positive role

| PROGRESSION OF TIMES | | | | |
|----------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| SCY | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
| 200 Free | 1:57.60 | 1:52.78 | 1:48.64 | 1:46.75 |
| 500 Free | 5:09.70 | 4:57.67 | 4:45.63 | 4:35.14 |
| 1000 Free | 10:55.03 | 10:20.28 | 9:44.06 | 9:29.81 |
| 1650 Free | — | 17:06.35 | 16:07.33 | 15:40.38 |
| | | | | |
| LC | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
| 200 Free | 2:11.86 | 2:05.17 | 2:00.79 | 2:00.01 |
| 400 Free | 4:39.27 | 4:20.30 | 4:10.39 | 4:08.87 |
| 800 Free | 9:58.38 | 8:58.86 | 8:36.05 | 8:30.14 |
| 1500 Free | — | 16:58.55 | 16:24.46 | — |

model for our training site and club. However, in the water, she is a fierce competitor who hates to lose and is mentally tough. I can give her sets to do by herself or have her come in on her own for extra work, and she doesn't bat an eye.

"As great an athlete as she is, she's an even better person. She's smart, humble, unassuming and comes from a great family. I've always been impressed with Katie's ability to handle her success and failures with a grace and maturity that belies her age," he says. This is especially obvious when one observes her adult manner and comfort with media.

Expect that ability to be put on display when Trials begin in late June. Will Ledecy make the team? Time will tell. In the interim, Suguiyama believes the sky is the limit.

"Over the next few years, Katie can definitely improve her overall physical strength. That great aerobic engine we've built isn't going anywhere, so I feel like if she can improve her overall coordination, body and core strength, she will continue to find ways to swim fast." ♦



[PHOTO PROVIDED BY CURL-BURKE SWIM CLUB]

Online Premium Members click here at www.SwimmingWorldMagazine.com to see some of Katie Ledecy's sample sets.

PICTURED » Katie Ledecy